

**CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
CITY OF WATERTOWN
October 11, 2016
5:30 p.m.**

Mayor Joseph M. Butler, Jr. Presiding

Present: Council Member Cody J. Horbacz
Council Member Stephen A. Jennings
Council Member Teresa R. Macaluso
Council Member Mark C. Walczyk
Mayor Joseph M. Butler, Jr.

Also Present: Sharon Addison, City Manager

City staff present: No staff present

DISCUSSION

Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Shelly Callahan, Executive Director of the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (MVRRCR), addressed Council and began her presentation (not on file in the City Clerk's Office) of the organization by giving a history of it since its inception in 1981. She mentioned that 16,000 people have been resettled to the Utica area over the years. Ms. Callahan noted the list of programs available through the MVRRCR to those who are new to the United States. She referred to the presentation as she reviewed who refugees are, durable solutions to settling refugees, the resettlement process and the demographic data of the City of Utica.

Ms. Callahan went over the list of community partners which offer great assistance to the Center, including DSS, the school district, the DMV, churches, employers and local landlords. She explained the process that occurs when they arrive in the United States which incorporates a cultural orientation. Ms. Callahan noted that the incorporation of refugees into the Utica community has turned their area around by revitalizing the housing stock and infusing a culturally diverse food offering.

In response to a question about funding, Ms. Callahan explained the federal government offers reimbursements for up to eight months post-arrival in the country. The refugees are expected to pay back their airfare, she said.

Regarding public assistance, Ms. Callahan noted all refugees receive it when they arrive and explained it takes a while to navigate the intricacies of American life.

Council Member Walczyk asked how many refugees are employed after being in the country for eight months.

Ms. Callahan replied that she does not know the percentage exactly but explained that they resettle 400-440 refugees annually and they have almost as many job placements per year. She noted that some refugees who come are not employable due to health issues and remarked that 50-60% of those who

come over currently are single adults. The demographic make-up of who is selected to come over is out of the MVRCR's control, she said. In addition, she stated that they do not bring over unaccompanied minors.

Discussion centered on how children assimilate to U.S. culture. Ms. Callahan said the younger they are, the faster they learn English.

Council Member Jennings asked what resources are available in the schools.

Ms. Callahan replied the school district provides an ESL program five days per week.

Mayor Butler brought up federal funding for schools that have an increased need of services for students from around the world.

Ms. Callahan explained the Utica school district receives a Refugee Impact Grant and is reimbursed a certain dollar amount per student they serve. She noted that she is not aware if private schools receive that funding.

Regarding housing, Mayor Butler commented that families will not be able to afford a house on \$9.25 per hour and inquired if there is low income housing available.

Ms. Callahan said the low income housing market is generally available through private landlords, some of which were refugees themselves. She added that sometimes refugees pool their resources and have different family blends living together. Ms. Callahan discussed the importance of the faith community in the Utica area and that a number of the churches have seen their congregants grow with the refugee population.

Council Member Horbacz inquired about entrepreneurialship within the refugee community.

The Fiscal Policy Institute is reviewing that data, Ms. Callahan said, and a certain timeline is involved. She again mentioned the "food tourism" that has increased due to more diverse ethnicities.

Mayor Butler inquired who facilitates the implementation of this whole plan locally; including overseeing and monitoring schooling, employment, etc.

Ms. Callahan replied that the Refugee Center in Utica and other faith-based organizations are critical to the whole program. In addition, the Center is a conduit to the Department of State and is audited and monitored. Home visits with refugees are also conducted regularly, she said.

Regarding whether the resettlement of refugees works or not, Ms. Callahan explained there is a very low out-migration rate and if the refugees are not happy where they have been placed, they can relocate. She noted that the majority of the time they are happy and ready to live the American dream and have a great appreciation of the opportunities available.

Discussing cultural orientation, Ms. Callahan said that is tailored to who is receiving it. She noted that some people come from major cities while others may come from extremely rural areas but all will be taught basics such as their address, learning to dial 911 and basic laws. They are also assisted in

obtaining their driver's license or other necessities. Ms. Callahan explained that the culturally diverse resettlement staff of eight or nine people is responsible for teaching the refugees and is with them intensely for the first 30 days to help them integrate for up to 90 days.

Mayor Butler asked about any testimonials to this program.

Ms. Callahan told a story of a couple who fled Burma eight years ago but had to leave their children behind at the time. Now, the children are with their parents in the Utica area, she said, and the parents just bought lunch for everyone in the MVRCCR office, which probably cost them several hundred dollars. She said the family has bought a house and both parents work.

Council and Ms. Callahan discussed the other cities in the State which offer this type of resource, mentioning Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Binghamton, Utica and Albany. She added that Lutheran Immigration Services and Catholic Charities are valuable partners and there are 400 refugee relocation sites across the country. Ms. Callahan said housing availability and a reasonable cost of living helps the program to succeed.

Council Member Macaluso inquired what the qualifications are for the City to be in the running for this program.

Ms. Callahan referred Council to the Site Development Guide (on file in the City Clerk's Office).

Discussion centered on how the MVRCCR communicates with the local government of Utica. Ms. Callahan explained the staffing level and number of board members and that she is in contact with the Mayor and county executives often.

Responding to a question about tenements, Ms. Callahan noted the refugees did not come to live in tenements and that she has seen the trend move toward refugees buying and renovating homes.

With regard to single adults, she said that influx is relatively new but they fit in with their ethnic community and often live with roommates and go to college or have jobs.

Ms. Callahan commented that in order for this to work in any community, a resettlement agency is essential and the community needs to want to do this. She added there are always going to be people who are fearful of something new but noted there are 5,000 Bosnian Muslims that have become an integral part of the Utica community. Regarding support issues, she said the refugees receive employment and language services and ESL, among other things. If Watertown wants to proceed with this, she said she is happy to help with site development and consulting.

Council Member Horbacz inquired how the Center is funded.

Ms. Callahan said it is federally funded, receives significant donations and has state contracts with regard to employment. In addition, she said, they sublet space to BOCES which generates revenue for their translation services. She responded to a question about the percentage of unmotivated refugees who come to the area and said that most are ready to participate and work. Some people, she noted, have medical issues which prevent them from having a job. Regarding the single adults who are relocated and the concern over terrorism, she said refugees undergo a strict screening and the vetting process can take

at least 18 to 24 months. She pointed out that Europe has a much different situation regarding refugees as they often just cross borders or waterways and have no background checks. In response to the selection process, she explained that it happens overseas and less than one percent are resettled.

Mayor Butler asked if there are any other small cities like Watertown that participate in this process.

Ms. Callahan said she will look into that but commented there is a city in Iowa which has filled employment opportunities with refugees from Utica.

Zombie Property Grant

Mayor Butler noted the City has received a \$150,000 grant to be applied to the zombie property issue.

Ms. Addison explained that the money will go toward software in Code Enforcement for a database, field work and staff augmentation.

Mayor Butler commented that a hotline will be added to identify zombie properties and Codes will be more proactive and create an inventory of neighborhoods in the City.

Work session ended at 6:42 p.m.

Amanda C. Lewis
Deputy City Clerk